Some Comments on the Shibboleth Incident  
(Judges xii 6)

One of the perennial problems of the book of Judges is the shibboleth incident in xii 1–6. The purpose of the present article is to comment on it in the light of several recent publications, and I offer this essay as a token of esteem and friendship to Professor Mathias Delcor, who has contributed so much to Old Testament and related studies, and whom I have known for many years.

The story of Judg. xii 1–6 is familiar. After their defeat by Jephthah, the Ephraimites fled westwards but were halted at the fords of the Jordan by the men of Gilead and were asked to say šibbōlet (with a shin). When the fugitives pronounced the word as sibbōlet (with a samekh), they betrayed their Ephraimite origin and were killed.

Some preliminary comments must be made before we turn to an examination of some recent suggestions. The word šibbōlet is generally recognized to be one or other of two Hebrew homonyms. The first means “ear of corn” and is cognate with Aramaic šubbalta’, Syriac šeb(b)alta’, Ugaritic šblt, Accadian šubaltu, Arabic sabalatun and sunbulatun, and Ethiopic sabl (I have not given a complete list of the variant forms in all the languages). The second word means “river, stream” or the like, and is probably cognate with Syriac šeb(b)alta’, which can be used of the flow (fluctus: Brockelmann) of a river. It has been thought to be also cognate with Arabic sabalun, “Rain... or flowing rain” (Lane), and sabilun, “way, road, or path”, with which Hebrew šbîl, “path”, has been compared. The suggested etymology of the second word is not as securely established as that of the first, but the proposed explanation of the second word as “watercourse” is plausible (cp. Beeeston).

In discussing the incident, it must be remembered, as Speiser has stressed, that the question is not simply how the word in question was normally pronounced in the dialect of Hebrew spoken by the Ephraimites, but their inability to pronounce a particular consonant. The men of Gilead did not point to an ear of corn or to the river and ask the Ephraimites what they called it. They asked the Ephraimites to say šibbōlet. It is a reasonable assumption that the
Ephraimites would not stubbornly have persisted in their own pronunciation of the word if they had been able to pronounce it in the Gileadite way: they would have pronounced the initial sibilant in the same way as the men of Gilead if they had been able to do so.\(^1\)

What, then, was the difficulty? Some have suggested that one or other of the dialects pronounced the first consonant of šibbōlet as the interdental spirant ṭ, the Proto-Semitic consonant which was preserved in Arabic but lost in Biblical Hebrew (until the later spirantization of ṭ in certain positions), where it merged with ś. It has also been suggested that ṭ was preserved in a Hebrew dialect after it had disappeared elsewhere in Hebrew. Thus, Marquart suggested in 1885 that the Ephraimites pronounced šibbōlet with ṭ as the initial consonant, but that what they said sounded like s to the men of Gilead. A different formulation of this type of theory is also possible: since there was no letter for ṭ in the Hebrew alphabet, it was represented in the text by the letter samekh, and so what is spelled with the letters sblt was pronounced by the Ephraimites with ṭ as the first consonant. On the other hand, Speiser suggested in 1942 that it was the men of Gilead who retained ṭ, and that this consonant is represented in Judg. xii 6 by the letter shin: the Gileadites pronounced as tblt the word that is spelled šblt. The Ephraimites, however, could not pronounce the consonant the same way and said s, which is represented by samekh.

The difficulty with such theories is that they conflict with the evidence of cognate languages, which testify that the first consonant was a sibilant. Attention has been drawn to the Aramaic noun tûblāʾ, “ear of corn” (see the Fragment Targum to Gen. xli), and to the fact that Proto-Semitic ṭ became t in Aramaic. Marquart, who thought that the word in Judges meant “river”, could not appeal directly to this Aramaic word with a different meaning, and developed a theory whereby Aramaic tûblāʾ, “ear of corn”, was confused with an unattested Aramaic noun tûbb’lāʾ meaning “river”. He also compared the Targum’s rendering tîblālāʾ, which is supposed to mean “snail”, for šablûl in Ps. lviii 9. It is unnecessary to discuss here the obscurities of these words in the Hebrew and Aramaic texts of the verse in the Psalter, but it may be observed that the meaning of the Hebrew is disputed, and that the Aramaic word may be an artificial word formed in the way suggested by Fraenkel for other words (see below). Apart from that, Marquart’s theory is complicated and postulates the existence of a noun for which there is no evidence; and the existence of Syriac šeb(b)altāʾ denoting the flow of a river, together with Arabic sabalun

\(^1\) It is therefore inadequate to suggest with Driver that the Ephraimites “used s where the Hebrews used š, just as the Arabs did” (p. 61), for it is also necessary to show why the Ephraimites were unable to pronounce š when their lives were in danger.